

## THE CHOICE FOR EUROPE

AN ADDRESS GIVEN IN THE FREE TRADE HALL  
MANCHESTER, MAY 9, 1938

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May 3-9. *Visit of Herr Hitler to Rome.*

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[May 9, 1938.]

I HAVE felt it my duty to make exertions, so far as I can, to arouse the country in the face of an ever-growing danger. This is no campaign against the Government of the day, nor against the Opposition. It is not intended to promote the interests of any party, or to influence the course of any Election. All Parties, Conservative, Liberal, Labour, Socialist, are on the platform. Church and Chapel, Protestant and Catholic, Jew and Gentile, have come together. Trade Union leaders, Co-operators, merchants, traders, industrialists, those who are reviving the strength of our Territorial forces, those who are working on A.R.P.—none have felt themselves debarred.

But what is the purpose which has brought us all together? It is the conviction that the life of Britain, her glories and message to the world, can only be achieved by national unity, and national unity can only be preserved upon a cause which is larger than the nation itself. However we may differ in political opinion, however divergent our Party interests, however diverse our callings and stations, we have this in common. We mean to defend our Island from tyranny and aggression, and so far as we can, we mean to hold out a helping hand to others who may be in even more immediate danger than at this moment we are ourselves. We repudiate all ideas of abject or slothful defeatism. We wish to make our country safe and strong—she can only be safe if she is strong—and we wish her to play her part with other Parliamentary democracies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in warding off from civilisation, while time yet remains, the devastating and obliterating horrors of another

## THE CHOICE FOR EUROPE, MAY 9, 1938

world war. We wish to see inaugurated a reign of international law, backed, as it must be in these turbulent times, by ample and, if possible, superabundant strength.

At this moment in history the broad, toiling masses in every country have for the first time the opportunity of a fuller and less burdened life. Science is at hand to spread a more bountiful table than has ever been offered to the millions and to the tens of millions. Shorter hours of labour, greater assurances against individual misfortune: a wider if a simpler culture: a more consciously realised sense of social justice: an easier and a more equal society—these are the treasures which after all these generations and centuries of impotence and confusion, are now within the reach of mankind.

Are these hopes, are these prospects, are all the secrets which the genius of man has wrested from Nature to be turned only by tyranny, aggression and war to his own destruction? Or are they to become the agencies of a broadening freedom, and of an enduring peace?

Never before has the choice of blessings or curses been so plainly, vividly, even brutally offered to mankind. The choice is open. The dreadful balance trembles. It may be that our Island and all the Commonwealths it has gathered around it may if we are worthy play an important, perhaps even a decisive part in turning the scales of human fortune from bad to good, from fear to confidence, from miseries and crimes immeasurable to blessings and gains abounding.

We make ourselves the servants of this cause, but it is no use espousing a cause without having also a method and a plan by which that cause may be made to win. I would not affront you with generalities. There must be the vision. There must be a plan, and there must be action following upon it. We express our immediate plan and policy in a single sentence: "Arm, and stand by the Covenant." In this alone lies the assurance of safety, the defence of freedom, and the hope of peace.

What is this Covenant by which we are to stand? It is the Covenant of the League of Nations. After the calamities of the Great War, many States and people banded themselves together to establish a system of collective security, whereby the violent aggression of one Government upon another should be curbed and prevented; and so that processes should be devised whereby the grievances of peoples or communities should be redressed fairly and sincerely without recourse to war. By the Covenant of the League, and by the Kellogg Pact, almost all countries have bound

## INTO BATTLE

themselves to adopt these principles, to enforce them, and to submit themselves to them.

How far, alas, do man's endeavours fall short in practice of his inspirations! Great States and peoples have fallen away. Some have violated the faith they had pledged. Some are seduced by intrigue, or have yielded themselves to the cynical, short-sighted and selfish. Many are oppressed by a sense of isolation and weakness. Others are obviously frightened. The Covenant has been broken. The League has been frustrated. Over all the anxious Governments, over all the vast masses, broods the baleful shadow of disunity and failure. In our ears ring the taunts of mockery and the reproach of fiasco.

And yet we stand here to-day to proclaim that this was the sovereign plan: that it remains at once the wisest, the most noble, the most sane, and the most practical path upon which the men and women of every land should set their feet to-night: on which they should march forward and for which they should strive with might and main.

If the League of Nations has been mishandled and broken, we must rebuild it. If a League of peace-seeking peoples is set at naught, we must convert it into a League of armed peoples, too faithful to molest others, too strong to be molested themselves. Why should we deem this task beyond our strength at the present time?

Outside this happy Island the world is dark with storm. In the Far East a brutal onslaught has been made upon what was thought to be an enormous, unorganised people. But the Chinese, patient, intelligent, brave, though sadly lacking in weapons, have rallied in resistance to the cruel invader and aggressor; and it is by no means certain that in the end they will be trampled down. Here we must recognise the service which Russia is rendering in the Far East. Soviet Russia, without firing a shot, is holding the best troops of Japan close gripped upon the Siberian front, and the rest of the Japanese armies may not in the end be found capable of subjugating and exploiting the four hundred millions of Chinese. At home in Japan there is not only financial and economic strain, but also a social awakening of the Japanese people, which already takes the form of serious discontent. If the Japanese nation be warned in time, they will withdraw before it is too late from a vainglorious enterprise, which if pursued might cast away all the wonderful progress they have made in fifty years.

Let us return to Europe. Two Dictators, men of unusual force and commanding ability, are saluting and embracing each other

in Rome. But any one can see the natural antagonisms of interest, and perhaps of aim, which divide their peoples. Anyone can see that the Italian Dictator is hard-pressed. In Abyssinia his conquest has proved a curse. The strength and resources of the industrious, amiable Italian people, are draining away. Abyssinia is occupied, but not subdued. Agriculture and industry are at a standstill. A very large army is being maintained far from home at a ruinous cost. The Italian people are being overstrained and impoverished. Their standards of living have noticeably declined. They can hardly purchase across the Exchange the many commodities they need to maintain the crushing weight of the armaments they have been called upon to bear. The violent seizure of Austria by Nazi Germany exposes Italy to direct contact with a far stronger aggressive power and the German leaders already speak of a road being opened to the Mediterranean, and to what they call "the riches of Africa." Even the Fascists of Italy, the Party-men, are asking themselves whether all this is to the permanent safety and advantage of their native land. Here then again, all is not well with Dictatorial power. Behind the horseman sits dull care. At this feast they might read like Belshazzar, the handwriting on the wall.

Let us come farther to the west. The agony of the Civil War continues. Had it been only a Spanish quarrel fought out by Spaniards, we might have averted our eyes from its horrors; but the shameful intrusions of Dictator powers with organised troops and masses of munitions under the deceitful masquerade of Non-Intervention, has invested their struggles with an added bitterness and a significance which extends far outside the Spanish Peninsula. But the Republican Government is still resisting. The end may be long delayed. The sympathy of the United States has become manifest in a remarkable degree. We may still cherish the hope that our country which has acted in entire good faith may yet find the means of mediating between the combatants, and helping both sides to reach some settlement which will make Spain a home for all her people.

But this brings me to the best news of all. France and England, the two Parliamentary democracies of the West, have come together, openly and publicly, in a defensive alliance, they are making common cause, and are taking the necessary measures in common for their mutual safety, and for the defence of the principles of freedom and free Government for which they stand. But what is this but a first and most important step towards collective security? Do we not all feel safer because the French and British peoples,

## INTO BATTLE

numbering 85 millions in Europe alone, have joined hands to safeguard one another from unprovoked aggression ?

Why should we stop here ? Why should we not invite others to join the combination, and why should we not associate this necessary action with the sanctions and authority of the Covenant of the League ? Is this not moreover a policy which will unite the greatest measure of opinion here at home ? It would be a great mistake if the Nation were needlessly divided by any attempt to mock and disparage the principles of international law and collective security which were common ground between all parties at the last election.

It is said that the League will embroil us in other peoples' quarrels, and we shall get no corresponding protection in return. Let us examine that objection. We are already deeply involved in Europe. Only a month ago the Prime Minister read out to the House of Commons a long list of countries in whose defence we were bound to go to war : France, Belgium, Portugal, Egypt and Iraq. He then discussed another class of countries which might become the victims of aggression, for whom we were not bound to go to war, but whose fate was a matter of great interest to us. We would not make any automatic and obligatory commitments in regard to them, but would judge an act of aggression when it occurred. Take the case of Czechoslovakia which he mentioned. Although we have not gone as far as France in giving a pledge to Czechoslovakia, Mr. Chamberlain has gone a long way. We are the ally of France which would certainly be involved. We may be drawn in, says the Prime Minister, by the force of circumstances, even in cases where there is no legal engagement. Finally, we are at this minute offering advice to Czechoslovakia, and if she takes that advice, and makes the concessions we think right, and finds herself attacked none the less, is it not clear that we are morally entangled ? We have thus in this case, the most urgent, undertaken in the name of detachment engagements beyond what the Covenant prescribes. The Covenant does not prescribe that we should go to war for Czechoslovakia, or any other country, but only that we should not be neutral in the sense of being indifferent as between an aggressor and the victim of aggression.

If the war breaks out in Europe, no one can say how far it will spread, or who will have it in their power to stand out of it. Is it not better then, on grounds of prudence alone, to gain the strength which comes from combined action ? Is it not wise to try to invest the Covenant with reality, to unite as many nations as possible in its support, to gain a measure of protection for ourselves, in return

for the risks we are to run for others. By this present policy of decrying the League and making the Covenant a matter of division between parties we are only having the disadvantage of both courses. It would indeed be disastrous if we were led into a fierce division here at home about foreign policy. An election fought on ordinary domestic issues is a process with which we are all familiar; but an election turning on the dread issues of defence and foreign policy, might leave us a deeply divided nation, with an evenly balanced, incoherent Parliament, and this at the very moment when the danger on the Continent had reached its height. That is why I plead for national unity, and for a policy upon which alone it is to be achieved. We might be having a general election in this country, or preparing for one, with both sides rivalling each other as to who was most in favour of peace at any price. We might have this at the very moment when the war-lust of Dictator Powers had reached its culminating explosion point.

But we are told that we must not involve ourselves in a quarrel about ideologies. If this means that we are not to back Communism against Nazi-ism or vice versa, we all agree. Both doctrines are equally obnoxious to the principles of freedom. Certainly we should not back one against the other. But surely we must have an opinion between Right and Wrong? Surely we must have an opinion between Aggressor and Victim? This is no question of resisting Dictators because they are Dictators, but only if they attack other people. Have we not an ideology—if we must use this ugly word—of our own in freedom, in a liberal constitution, in democratic and Parliamentary government, in Magna Charta and the Petition of Right? Ought we not to be ready to make as many sacrifices and exertions for our own broad central theme and cause, as the fanatics of either of these new creeds? Ought we not to produce in defence of Right, champions as bold, missionaries as eager, and if need be, swords as sharp as are at the disposal of the leaders of totalitarian states?

Finally, there must be a moral basis for British foreign policy. People in this country, after all we have gone through, do not mean to be drawn into another terrible war in the name of old-world alliances or diplomatic combinations. If deep causes of division are to be removed from our midst, if all our energies are to be concentrated upon the essential task of increasing our strength and security, it can only be because of lofty and unselfish ideals which command the allegiance of all classes here at home, which rouse their echoes in the breasts even of the Dictator-ridden peoples themselves, and stir the pulses of the English-speaking



## INTO BATTLE

race in every quarter of the globe. That is why I say "Stand by the Covenant and endeavour to revive and fortify the strength of the League."

Here is the practical plan. Britain and France are now united. Together they are an enormous force moral and physical, and one which few would dare to challenge. I should like to see these two countries go to all the smaller states that are menaced, who are going to be devoured one by one by the Nazi tyranny, and say to them bluntly, "We are not going to help you if you are not going to help yourselves. What are you going to do about it? What are you going to contribute? Are you prepared to take special service in defence of the Covenant? If you are willing to do so, and to prove it by actions, then we will join together with you, if there are enough of you, in active military association under the authority of the League in order to protect each other and the world from another act of aggression."

You cannot expect all the states of the League to take equal obligations. Some are far away and some are in no danger. But if we could rally even ten well-armed states in Europe, all banded together to resist an aggression upon any one of them, all banded together to counter-attack the aggressor upon a combined plan, then we should be so strong that the immediate danger would be warded off, and a breathing space be gained for building later a still broader structure of peace. Is that not far better than being dragged piece-meal into a war when half those who might have been your friends and allies will have already been pulled down one by one? No single nation should be asked to enter into this solemn engagement unless it is assured of strong and valiant comrades banded together not only by a covenant of high ideals, but by practical military conventions. In this way we have the best chance of preventing a war, and if that fails, of surviving it unconquered.

To be precise—some of the countries who should be asked whether they will join Great Britain and France in this special duty to the League are Yugoslavia, Rumania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. These countries can be mopped up one by one, but together they are of enormous strength. In the next place there are Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, all states who wish to preserve their individuality and national independence, the two last of whom are already joined to us by the most cordial friendship. If this powerful group of Danubian and Balkan states were firmly united with the two great Western democracies, an immense, probably a decisive, step towards stability would be achieved.

## THE CHOICE FOR EUROPE, MAY 9, 1938

But even that would only be a beginning. To the east of Europe lies the enormous power of Russia, a country whose form of government I detest, but which at any rate seeks no military aggression upon its neighbours, a country whose interests are peace, a country profoundly menaced by Nazi hostility, a country which lies as a great background and counterpoise at this moment to all those states of Middle Europe I have mentioned. We should certainly not go cap in hand to Soviet Russia, or count in any definite manner upon Russian action. But how improvidently foolish we should be when dangers are so great, to put needless barriers in the way of the general association of the great Russian mass with resistance to an act of Nazi aggression.

There is, however, a third stage in the process. There is Poland; and the countries of the north, the Baltic states, the Scandinavian powers. If we had once gathered together the forces I have mentioned, we should then be in a position to offer these countries a very great measure of armed security for peace. At the present time they do not know which way to turn. But if they saw a strong, armed association, such as I have described, whose interest in peace was the same as theirs, they might easily be induced to throw in their lot with us and "make assurance double sure."

But what is this but a recreated League of Nations, devoted to its original purpose, namely the prevention of war? If we could, therefore, get as far as this, believe me the war danger would be removed from us perhaps for our lifetime. And across the Atlantic Ocean the United States would signal her encouragement and sympathy.

I shall be told, "But this is the encirclement of Germany." I say, "No, this is the encirclement of an aggressor." Nations who are bound by the Covenant can never, however powerful they may be, menace the peace and independence of any other state. That is the essence of the conditions which bring them together. To form a war combination against a single state would be a crime. To form a combination for mutual defence against a probable aggressor is not only no crime, but the highest moral duty and virtue. We ask no security for ourselves that we are not prepared freely to extend to Germany. If Germany nourishes no aggressive designs, if Germany professes herself to be afraid of attack, let her join too; let her join the club and share fairly and equally all its privileges and safeguards.

We have made an agreement with Italy about which there are many hopes and many misgivings. No one knows, however, on which side Italy would be found to stand if Nazi Germany precipitates another great war. But Italy has great service to render



to such a League as I have described. Nothing would make the Anglo-Italian agreement a reality, so much as the friendly association of all these countries in maintaining the peace of Central and Southern Europe.

Now, that is a foreign policy which involves us in no commitments more entangling than those which we have already taken, and which gives us the possibilities should it be successful—and one can but try—of substantial if not absolute security. There is nothing visionary or sentimental about such a policy. It is nothing more or less than common sense, and in addition it is enshrined in that great structure of international law and unity embodied in the League of Nations and the Covenant. This may be a noble dream, but it is also a practical plan, and one which I believe, if pursued with courage, comprehension and decision, would rally a peaceful Europe around a strong Britain and France. It is not even now too late to carry such a policy through to success. Then when we have gathered these forces, and by united strength removed the fear of war, then will be the time to deal with the grievances of discontented nations, to get rid of the causes of hatred and jealousy, as you will have removed the causes of fear. Then will be the time to proceed to the culmination of the whole work, namely, the broad general reduction of the hideous burden of armaments, which if it continues to grow at its present rate can only lead through bankruptcy to mutual destruction.

Before you reject this great hope with all its effort and its risk, which I in no wise conceal, consider the alternative. There is another foreign policy which you are urged to pursue. It is not to worry about all these countries of Central Europe, not to trouble yourself with preserving the Covenant of the League, to recognise that all that is foolish and vain and can never be restored, and to make a special pact of friendship with Nazi Germany. There is no reason why we should not live in a friendly manner with Germany. It is our duty to try to do so, little as we like her system of government, deeply as we are revolted by the cruel racial and religious persecution on which the flames of Nazi hatred feed themselves. Still, in making an international arrangement to preserve the peace of the world, we could no more exclude Nazi Germany than Soviet Russia. But when we are told we must make a special pact with Nazi Germany, I want to know what that pact is going to be, and at whose expense it is to be made. Undoubtedly our Government could make an agreement with Germany. All they have to do is to give her back her former colonies, and such others as she may desire; to muzzle the British press and platform by

## THE CHOICE FOR EUROPE, MAY 9, 1938

a law of censorship, and to give Herr Hitler a free hand to spread the Nazi system and dominance far and wide through Central Europe. That is the alternative foreign policy. It is one which, in my view, would be disgraceful and disastrous. In the first place it leads us straight to war. The Nazi regime, elated by this triumph, with every restraint removed, would proceed unchecked upon its path of ambition and aggression. We should be the helpless, silent, gagged, apparently consenting, spectators of the horrors which would spread through Central Europe. The Government that enforced such a policy would be swept away. The mere instinct of self-preservation would make it impossible for us to purchase a fleeting and precarious immunity at the cost of the ruin and enslavement of Europe. After an interval, long or short, we should be drawn into a war, like the United States were drawn into the Great War. But by that time we should be confronted with an antagonist, overwhelmingly powerful, and find ourselves deprived of every friend.

Have I not set out to you these issues plainly? And is there any doubt which way duty and safety point? Hitherto I have been dealing with questions about which there is confusion of thought in our country, and about which there may be a grievous division at a time when unity is vital. But now I come to an issue upon which we are all agreed, namely the rearmament of our country for its own security, to discharge its duties, and to maintain its safety. There is a need for greater effort. There is a need for united effort. There is a need to lay aside our easy-going life, to have efficiency and a broad national plan.

A large part of our dangers and the dangers of Europe is due to the fact that we did not rearm in time. It was certainly not through lack of warning, but when we at last began it was only in a half-hearted, ramshackle, confused manner, which though it has led to great outpourings of money, has not been attended by proportionate results. Is it not lamentable that our Air Force is not now fully equal to any Power within striking distance of these shores? Is it not grievous that the vast, flexible industry of Britain has not yet been able to produce a broad and copious flow of the latest weapons of all kinds? After all, it is nearly three years since Mr. Baldwin recognised the dangers which beset us. Late as we started we ought by now to be in a strong position. Parliament is to discuss this matter this week. There ought certainly to be a searching enquiry into the condition of the Air Force, and into the reasons why the solemn pledge given to the country by Mr. Baldwin of air parity, has been broken.

## INTO BATTLE

But an equal confusion and delay covers large parts of the field of munitions supply. It is greatly to be regretted that after nearly three years since the Government became alive to the dangers, and nearly five years since the danger became apparent, the equipment of our small Regular Army should be incomplete, and that the supplying of the Territorial Army with modern weapons and appliances should be only in a rudimentary stage. As for Air Raid Precautions, artillery, balloons, organisation in every form, you know for yourselves—as well as the Germans know—the unhappy and discreditable conditions which prevail. This is no case for the Opposition to make party capital against the Government. Nor for the Government to try to shield incompetence and misdirection. All should set country before party. There should be a thorough and searching inquest into the mismanagement of the past and a fearless resolve to sweep away every obstacle that stands in the path of our regaining our national safety. Meanwhile everyone must do his best.

Look at the danger in which we stand. Germany has been rearming night and day for four years. For four years past they have never spent less in any year than £800,000,000 sterling on war preparation. The whole manhood of the country is harnessed to war. Even the children are organised. Every thought is turned to race assertion and the conquest of weaker, more exhausted, or less determined breeds. They are driving forward on their path. Every six weeks a new army corps is added to their active forces. Never has there been such an outpouring of munitions of war. At present we are shielded to some extent by the strength of the French army, but the German numbers are overtaking them month by month. We have still our Navy, never, happily, so supreme in European waters. But our Air Force on which so much depends, so far from overtaking Germany, is actually falling further and further behind. If we are to place ourselves in security we must throw ourselves into the business of national defence with the vigour and concentration which Germany now displays.

It is no small or local cause we plead to-night. We must march in the good company of Nations and we march under the standards of Law, of Justice and of Freedom. We must gather together round the joint strength of Britain and France and under the authority of the League all countries prepared to resist, and if possible to prevent acts of violent aggression. There is the path to safety. There are the only guarantees of Freedom. There, on the rock of the Covenant of the League of Nations alone, can we build high and enduring the temple and the towers of Peace.